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BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

WOUNDED HEALER

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Mark 1: 40-45

Dear God, your son reached across a wide space created by custom and culture and religion one day, and touched a man no one else would touch, and made him whole. We thank you for all the ways you touch us; with the beauty of the world and people to love and music to sing and friends to care for and a church to belong to. So now touch our minds and our hearts with your word of compassion and justice and love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

At Massachusetts General, one of the great teaching hospitals in the United States, there is an experimental program going on that received a lot of national attention. In fact, it was the subject of an ABC 20/20 segment. The experiment was organized and orchestrated by the Mass General chaplains' office when the medical staff asked for help. It seems that increasingly, hospital patients, particularly those who are seriously ill and facing major surgery, were asking physicians, nurses and other hospital personnel spiritual questions—questions about God and suffering and pain and healing and death and prayer. And so a program was created to help medical personnel deal with their patients' spiritual concerns. Some patients were even asking doctors and nurses to pray with them which for most was, and is, a difficult situation. Nurse Donna McKay, who works the night shift in oncology says that it is in the evening, at night, after visiting hours, when family and friends have gone and the hospital becomes quiet and patients are alone for the first time all day, that the questions come—and the fear and the loneliness and the sense of isolation and aloneness and the requests for prayer.

An anesthesiologist told ABC's Timothy Johnson that after going through the program and becoming a little more comfortable with her own faith, she gently introduces the subject with her patients as she helps them get ready for surgery. She has learned to ask if they want to talk or pray in an unobtrusive, non-threatening way, and to respect immediately the patients who do not. But most, she testifies, are not only surprised, but grateful to be able to express themselves religiously to a doctor and many gladly accept her offer to pray for them. ABC captured the intimacy and the power of her conversation and prayer with a woman prior to breast cancer surgery.

Hospitals all over the country are paying attention. One third of all medical schools now include courses on spirituality.

Health and Healing is something of a mystery. Is health the absence of sickness, the absence of physical symptoms, the absence of abnormalities? Or is it a general state of well being which includes mind and spirit as well as body? That's what the ancient Hebrews thought. They used the same word "Shalom" to express peace, wholeness, well-being, and salvation. However you define it, health, healing, wholeness, restoration is very much at the heart of Christian faith and experience and history. In fact, it is the way the story of Jesus is introduced to us by the first account to be written, the Gospel according to Mark. In the first few paragraphs, as soon as Jesus of Nazareth gathers a few followers and begins his public ministry, he heals a man with an unclean spirit—we might say mental illness, a psychosis—then Peter's mother-in-law who gets up from her sick bed and starts to make dinner, and then a man with leprosy. And it will continue. Crowds of people are searching for him wherever he goes in Galilee because of his reputation as a healer, a reputation, by the way, that he does not seem to want. He knows, apparently, the temptations which accompany a reputation as a "faith healer," a reputation so easily exploited at the expense of sick people, a lesson television faith healers have not learned.

Nevertheless, Jesus is initially defined in terms of the love and compassion and power to restore human beings to wholeness and health—which sometimes means physical healing, and sometimes not. Which is why, ultimately, I think, he did not want to be known as a healer.

The incident in today's text is fascinating, and important. It is about the overlap between religion and medicine, the relationship between body and spirit and the love of the one who takes human pain, physical and spiritual, very seriously, and in poignant human terms it is about separation and restoration.

The man has leprosy—which is the word Hebrew culture used for any skin disorder, discoloration or eruption. It may have included Hansen's Disease which is the official name for modern leprosy, although some medical research indicates that Hansen's—or true leprosy—did not appear in Palestine until years later. In any event, Leprosy was important and different from other illnesses because it could be deforming and it was terribly frightening and it seemed to be contagious so it was both a medical problem and a social problem.

The law — the religious law which was also the civil law — defined people with leprosy as "unclean." In the Book of Leviticus, Israel's Purity, or Holiness Code is defined in detail. It makes for fascinating reading and some of it still makes a great deal of medical sense. Generally, things that

look different or abnormal are called “unclean.” When you get a strange skin rash you go to the priest who takes a look and if he concludes that you have leprosy or if he isn’t sure, or if he thinks your rash looks dangerous, he confers on you the taboo “unclean.” You are thereafter banished from the community; you have to wear torn clothing, let your hair hang loose so people can see you coming and avoid you, cover your upper lip with your hand and cry out “Unclean, Unclean,” whenever you approach another human being. You must live outside the community wherever you can, often times with other banished men and women, in a cave or an empty tomb which is appropriate, because your life is over. You are dead. You certainly are not going to touch, or be touched by anyone again: not your beloved, not your wife or husband, not your children or parents. No more embraces, no affectionate pat on the cheek, no passion obviously, no holding your dear son’s or daughter’s hand — no touch ever again. Unless, that is, your symptoms somehow disappear and then you return to the priest who has another look, and if satisfied, prescribes a sacrifice and upon its completion, declares that you are now clean and fit to resume your role in the community, your life.
The law also prohibits your presence in the Synagogue and suggests, at least, that your disease is God’s punishment for your sins—which makes you feel even worse. Finally, anyone who touches you or is touched by you is also unclean.

To the extent that whatever was physically wrong was infectious, the system was effective. Until fairly recently, the only way the world knew how to deal with infection was isolation. I grew up in a time when infectious, contagious diseases such as the measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, had to be reported to the public health department and an official would come to your house and nail a white sign on the outside of your house that announced to the world — our version of the ancient taboo of uncleaness — “Someone inside has measles so stay away.” In the meantime, you chums were in class doing long division or diagramming sentences while you were upstairs in bed reading comic books and listening to the radio—for days—with your mother treating you like royalty, bringing you ginger ale and toast. The sign was placed prominently on the outside of your house. I always thought the whole business was pretty interesting—couldn’t wait till we had our own quarantine sign which in time, of course, happened. In the middle ages, plague victims were occasionally simply put out of the house, or in some more extreme situations, placed together in a house that was boarded up.

The tragedy—the tragedy for this desperate man who comes to Jesus—is that he may not have been very sick physically. And yet he was dead.

So desperate was he that when he has the opportunity, he breaks with convention, breaks the law, approaches Jesus and asks—now notice—not to

be cured of leprosy, but to be clean. What he desperately wants, what he profoundly needs, is to be restored to his family, his community, his religion, his self, his life.

And notice what Jesus does.

> "If you choose—you can make me clean," the man says. And Mark reports: "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean."

That is remarkable. Jesus breaks the law, too. Jesus is now unclean. Jesus has deliberately taken into himself the man's condition, his isolation, his illness.

And furthermore, Jesus has just done something only a priest can do, namely calling this man clean.

And most dramatically, he has reversed the sequence. The priest needs to see the absence of symptoms before he says clean.

Jesus touches a man with leprosy and says—"you're clean." Even with your leprosy, you're clean. That's radical. In the context of his culture it is revolutionary. Jesus calls an unclean man clean. Jesus presumes to restore to full participation in the human community a man the religious institutions kept out.
"Moved with pity" Jesus touched him, the text says, but if you look down at the bottom of the page where the footnotes are, you'll see that many scholars and ancient sources are saying that's a mistranslation. What it really says is "moved with anger." Interesting — Jesus moved by anger! Anger at what, do you suppose? Anger at the man for having leprosy? I don't think so. Could it be that Jesus is angry at religion that isolates, marginalizes, excludes a precious child of God; religion that gets it backwards—instead of extending hospitality, welcoming to the community—all, particularly the outcasts, religion that, in the name of the God of all, somehow concludes that its function is to exclude and isolate and marginalize? I think that made Jesus angry. I think that's why he acted so courageously. I think that's why he broke the law with his own hand, reached across the boundary — making principle of institutional religion and said in anger, "my boundaries are much broader, much more generous, much more hospitable, much more inclusive than yours." And yes, I believe, the ongoing propensity of institutional religion is to do that, to exclude, to keep out, to invest institutional energy in drawing definitive boundaries, to keep out those who are different, those who, by our customs and traditions are unclean. Reynolds Price, distinguished novelist wrote:

> "The church, in most of its past and present forms, has defaced and even reversed whole broad aspects of Jesus' teaching; but in no case has the church turned more culpably from his aim and practice than its hateful rejection of what it sees as outcasts: . . . If it is possible to discern, in the gospel accounts, a conscious goal of Jesus . . . can we detect a surer aim than his first and last announced intent to sweep the lost with him into God's coming reign?" (Three Gospels, P.33)

Jesus put this lonely, isolated man in a new place. It is called God's kingdom, where all are welcome, where no one is a stranger, where boundaries are generous and broad and full of windows and doors, for those on the outside, for whatever reason, to enter and find welcome and hospitality and acceptance and restoration and wholeness. That's what that touch meant.

It is no accident that when Jesus called him clean—the man's leprosy disappeared. Paul Tillich — one of the greatest theologians of our era wrote:

> "Sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as if a voice were saying: 'You are accepted . . . sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say 'yes' to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole, that self-hate, and self-contempt disappear and that our self is reunited with itself." (The Shaking of the Foundation, p.162-163)

That's what happened when Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the man who had leprosy. And I propose that what Jesus did for the man with leprosy is the reason we have the church; that in touching this untouchable, this outcast, Jesus gave us a model for the church and its mission and purpose.

Annie Lamott is a popular author who writes honesty and movingly about her own spiritual journey, her harrowing experiences with alcohol and drugs and disastrous relationships on her way to recovery and wholeness through church — St. Andrews Presbyterian Church of Marin, California. In fact, she dedicated her book Traveling Mercies to all the people of that little congregation who welcomed her, accepted her, adopted her and her son, and loved her back into wholeness.

Annie Lamott is not always fastidious about her vocabulary, but she knows what the church is supposed to be and on occasion is:

"Broken things have been on my mind recently and in the lives of people I love. Our wonderful friend Ken died of AIDS—not long after, my friend, Mimi, began to die after a long struggle with a rare blood disease . . .Our

preacher, Veronica, said recently that this is life's nature: that lives and hearts get broken, those of people we love, those of people we'll never meet. She said that the world sometimes feels like the waiting room of the emergency ward and that we who are more or less OK for now, need to take the tenderest possible care of the more wounded people in the waiting room until the healer comes. You sit with people, she said, you bring them juice and graham crackers." (p. 106)

The good news is that the healer has come.

Jesus Christ is his name.

Amen.